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Entry Nr. 010 Louis Congo

Aaron Spencer Fogleman
Northern Illinois University, aaronfogleman@niu.edu

Robert Hanserd

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Aaron Spencer Fogleman and Robert Hanserd (eds.), *Five Hundred African Voices: A Catalog of Published Accounts by Africans Enslaved in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1586-1936* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2022).

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Name(s) of African providing account: **Louis Congo**
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Source: From p. 211-212 in VOICES OF THE ENSLAVED: LOVE, LABOR, AND LONGING IN FRENCH LOUISIANA by Sophie White. Copyright © 2019 by the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. Used by permission of the University of North Carolina Press.

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Sophie White comments: (p. 211)

“In 1725, in the midst of a desperate struggle to find an executioner to carry out judicial sentences in a fledgling colony filled with exiled convicts, Company of the Indies officials eventually proposed hiring “Louis Congo *nègre*, belonging to the Company plantation, strong and vigorous” (*Louis Congo negre appartenant à la Compagnie sur son habitation fort et robuste*), to serve as the public executioner. They agreed to manumit him in exchange for taking the position. Recognizing his advantage in the negotiation, Louis Congo refused to accept their offer of freedom unless his wife was also manumitted, and he promptly made a number of specific demands, likely with her input. An official from the Superior Council of Louisiana left a description of the long, drawn-out haggling over terms:”

Text of Account:

p. 211:

Original French --

“il demande sa Liberté et celle de sa femme et la Ration complete en vivres et Boisson pour luy Seulement, outre qu’on luy donne un terrain à luy en propre, et separé des habitans sur lequel il s’establira luy et sa femme aussy negresse appartenant à la Compagnie sur lequel il travaillera pour son Compte”

English translation --

“He requests his freedom and that of his wife, and a complete ration in goods and drink for himself only, also that we give him a plot of land, separate from the habitants which he will work for his own account and on which he will establish himself and his wife, also *negresse* belonging to the King.”

Sophie White comments:

“After discussing the relative cost of freeing two slaves in light of the urgent need for an executioner, the council agreed to all of Louis Congo’s demands. They granted him his freedom along with a complete ration plus a plot of land measuring two arpents (about 1.6 acres) and set out a schedule of fees for each type of judicial punishment he would carry out. Finally, they “granted him his wife to live with him without the Company using her at its service” (*luy laisse sa femme pour habiter avec luy sans que la Compagnie l’employe à son service*).

p. 212:

“In a separate missive, Commissaire-ordonnateur Jacques de La Chaise, the highest-ranking administrator in the colony, commented on the “*belle negresse*” (beautiful *negresse*) who had been freed as part of the deal with the new executioner, omitting any information on the couple’s attachment beyond an assumption about physical attraction. But, for Louis Congo, the key factor in his negotiation was for his wife to live with him without having to do any labor for the company. Henceforth, any work she did was for the benefit of his household. This arrangement would have suited both him and his wife, as it was one familiar from their own upbringing in West Africa. At the same time, one can only imagine the satisfaction that Louis Congo and his unnamed wife felt in successfully rejecting the work regime that the French had imposed on her and, by extension, on other enslaved women.”

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